

Teaming up with parents to support inclusive recreation

Linda A Heyne; Stuart J Schleien

Parks & Recreation; May 1997; 32, 5; Research Library

pg. 76

Teaming Up With Parents Support Inclusive Recreation

By Linda A. Heyne and Stuart J. Schleien



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For over a dozen years, recreation professionals have been exploring new ways to include people with disabilities in community recreation settings. Yet, in many towns, cities and rural areas across the country, the impetus for inclusion continues to originate from parents of children with disabilities who must "knock on doors" in an effort to acquire access for their children. The isolation and frustration that many parents feel when advocating for inclusive services is evident in the stories they tell of prejudice and of the denial of their children's right to participation.

The theme of this issue, "Making Us Better Helpers," challenges us, as both individuals and representatives of service delivery systems, to examine the roles we play in serving the needs of families of children with disabilities. This theme also invites us to better understand the people for whom our services are designed. We ask ourselves then: What are the contributions, needs, and visions of families of children with disabilities? How might we and our services best meet their needs and influence their growth and participation to the maximum potential?

Many recreation professionals who work with children with disabilities recognize that parents are often our strongest allies in promoting inclusive services. Yet the responsibility for advocating for and facilitating inclusion must shift from parents to recreation providers

In this article the term parent is used to refer to the person who fills the parental role, and who may or may not be the legal or biological mother or father. The term family includes any of the variety of forms families can assume. We define parents and families not so much by biological or legal relationships as by the role and function they assume in a child's life.

who are competently equipped to offer inclusive services. As the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 mandates, the readiness and willingness to provide inclusion must be adopted by recreation providers to the extent that, even before a parent or a person with a disability approaches a recreation facility, the door to inclusion is open.

As noted above, recreation practitioners and researchers have developed numerous strategies to include children with disabilities in recreation programs (please see the list of resources at the end of this article). This article highlights those guidelines that have been specifically designed to encourage a collaborative relationship between parents and professionals. This article also explores the contributions that both parents and professionals give to the collaborative relationship, and recommends several published materials for those who wish to learn more about inclusion.

The Parent-Professional Collaborative Relationship

When forming any kind of collaborative relationship, it is important to acknowledge and appreciate the gifts, contributions, and roles that each member of the partnership offers. This section discusses what both recreation professionals and parents of children with disabilities bring to a partnership designed to promote inclusive recreation.

What Parents Offer

Along with each person's talents and aptitudes, parents and care providers offer professionals a wealth of knowledge about their children with disabilities. As the individuals who know their children best, parents provide valuable information about a child's preferences, personality, strengths, abilities, needs, learning styles, idiosyncrasies, and likes and dislikes. Years of experience have made par-

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from

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ents rich sources of recommendations for interacting with their children and meeting their needs.

Parents also provide a cultural and familial context within which to view the child. They see the child from a holistic perspective—as a son or daughter, a brother or sister, a member of an ethnic or cultural group with characteristic traditions and values, and as a citizen of a community. Most importantly, parents bring their hopes and dreams for their children's overall growth and well-being. Parents' recreation goals for their children might include making friends, learning to play, feeling good about themselves and building self-esteem, having fun, or learning to behave and interact appropriately. Knowing a parent's wishes and goals can serve as a strong motivator for professionals who wish to assist them in actualizing these dreams.

What Professionals Offer

Recreation professionals bring many gifts to the field, the most obvious being a desire to serve others. The idealism, altruism, enthusiasm, and commitment of individual professionals contributes tremendously to the quality of recreation programming and services. These attributes are also instrumental in creating trusting, cooperative relationships with parents and participants. Similar to parents, recreation professionals contribute vast knowledge to the inclusion dialogue. Practitioners possess knowledge about recreation resources, programming, participants, inclusion techniques, and service delivery systems. This knowledge of practices and procedures coupled with parent perspectives creates a powerful alliance for ensuring that the individual needs of children are correctly assessed and competently addressed.

It is not unusual for a parent—even one who is very pro-inclusion—to be reluctant at times to involve his or her child in an inclusive program. A parent may fear that the child may encounter teasing from other program participants or embarrassment over poor performance. In these instances, professionals (as well as



other parents) can offer important encouragement and moral support. They can prepare program leaders and participants without disabilities to learn about, interact with and accept participants with disabilities. Furthermore, because recreation professionals typically have few preconceptions about an individual's performance, they maintain the same high expectations for performance by a child with a disability as by children without disabilities. Heightened expectations tend to yield heightened performance; consequently, many ambivalent parents' fears are allayed as they observe their children successfully participating in inclusive settings. And these successes, brought on by support from nurturing professionals, embolden parents to think more broadly about future possibilities for their children.

Appreciation for each others' roles and contributions lays the groundwork for a parent-professional partnership based on mutual respect and support. With this foundation, parents and professionals can team up to support the goal of inclusion.

Strategies for Partnership

The following strategies are offered to illustrate how professionals can reach out to families of children with disabilities and create opportunities to collaborate with parents to support inclusion.

Welcome Families of Children with Disabilities

There are many ways that a recreation agency can communicate to families that their children with disabilities are welcome at a facility. An agency can advertise that inclusion opportunities are available via newsletters of local schools and advocacy organizations (e.g., The Arc, United Cerebral Palsy Associations) or in local newspapers. Our own agency brochures and schedules can include a statement or credo indicating the agency's philosophy about inclusion and willingness to serve people with disabilities. Photos that depict people with and without disabilities participating together

in programs can appear in agency's printed materials. These public statements and images help inform and educate the entire community about an agency's position on inclusion, as well as communicate to families of children with disabilities that they are valued by agency staff members.

Some recreation services are housed in older buildings that do not provide barrier-free architectural accessibility as established by Section 502 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. An agency should not, however, use architectural obstacles as an excuse to deny services to people with disabilities. Funds should be sought to provide a barrier-free facility; and, until such time as barriers are removed, programmatic adaptations should be employed to offset architectural barriers. For example, an inclusive program can be held in a room located on a ground level floor, an accessible changing room can be designated in lieu of a locker room that is not accessible, and inclusion practices can be implemented in those areas and programs that are barrier-free. Programmatic accommodations and a welcoming attitude communicate that inclusion is the goal, despite physical obstacles that may currently exist.

Offer a Single Point of Contact

Parents of children with disabilities often find themselves repeatedly explaining their children's and families' needs to multiple professionals in order to receive services. An agency can alleviate the exasperation parents feel in these situations by designating a single employee, typically a certified therapeutic recreation specialist (CTRS), to serve as the parent contact for inclusion. (If funding prevents the hiring of a CTRS, another staff member trained in inclusion techniques and issues related to people with disabilities may serve in this capacity.) This inclusion facilitator gathers all important information from the parent, and then transmits the pertinent information to the staff who directly supervise and lead programs. When registering a child for a program, a parent can assist the inclusion

process by informing the inclusion facilitator of the child's enrollment in a program and then following the usual sign-up procedures.

Assess Individual Needs and Preferences With Parents and Participants

As noted earlier, parents of participants possess the most complete information about a child's personality, preferences, needs, abilities, goals, and family. A combination of a written questionnaire and a personal interview between the inclusion facilitator and the family works well to gather accurate assessment information. Questionnaires should be detailed enough to cover information about such important matters as recreation, medical, mobility, socialization, communication, and behavior management requirements, yet not so lengthy as to overburden parents. Questions should be culturally sensitive and written in language that parents can understand—that is, language that is non-technical, not jargon, and, if English is not understood, language that is translated into the family's native tongue.

During an intake interview, a professional must take particular care to listen attentively to family members. Parents and participants with disabilities are the leaders of the inclusion process; professionals should follow their lead and offer support through appropriate inclusion techniques. Inclusion strategies might include pairing up a child with a peer without a disability, adapting rules or equipment, or providing one-to-one assistance from an advocate.

Invite Parents to Collaborate

Parents can play key roles in the inclusion decision making process. An executive director or inclusion facilitator can invite parents of children with and without disabilities to sit on an agency's Board of Directors or an Inclusion Advisory Board that oversees the agency's inclusion process. In addition, to discussing particular issues related to inclusion and people with disabilities, focus groups can be organized to obtain parent feedback,

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brainstorm ideas, help families become acquainted, or develop recommendations for policy changes.

Maintain Ongoing Communication

Relationships and friendships are built through regular, frequent contact and interaction. Similarly, the best way for pro-

fessionals to form trusting relationships with parents is through regular opportunities for communication. Parent contact may take the form of direct personal interaction such as greetings in the hallway of a recreation facility, telephone conversations, or conversations in the bleachers while children are participating in a

Learn About New Inclusion Strategies

Recreation professionals must be well-versed in inclusion techniques and well-equipped to meet the needs of people with disabilities in regular programs. Training about people with varying abilities and how to support them in regular programming should be provided to all staff, including supervisors, program leaders, and volunteers. Several resources are currently available to assist agencies in learning about inclusive practices. A sampling of these resources is presented below, in alphabetical order by first author, along with a brief description of content and contact numbers to order copies and to request further information.

- *Inclusion: Strategies for Including People With Disabilities in Parks and Recreation Opportunities* by Lynn Anderson, Carla Brown, and Patricia Soli (North Dakota Parks and Recreation Department; University of North Dakota). This manual provides a comprehensive, practical resource for training recreation staff about people with disabilities and inclusion strategies. To order, call 701/328-5361.
- *Inclusive Leisure Services: Responding to the Rights of People With Disabilities* by John Dattilo (Venture Publishing). This book outlines strategies to enhance the quality of life of people with disabilities by involving them in leisure services. To order, call 814/234-4561.
- *Making Friends: Using Recreation Activities to Promote Friendship Between Children With and Without Disabilities* by Linda Heyne, Stuart J. Schleien, and Leo

McAvoy (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota). This handbook provides suggestions to encourage friendships through recreation participation and conducting family focus groups. To order, call 612/624-4512.

- *Making School and Community Recreation Fun for Everyone: Places and Ways to Integrate* by M. Sharri Moon (Paul H. Brookes Publishing). This book provides a workable plan for any community member to promote inclusion in school and community recreation settings. To order, call 800/638-3775.

- *Lifelong Leisure Skills and Lifestyles for Persons with Developmental Disabilities* by Stuart J. Schleien, Luanna Meyer, Linda Hayne, and Bonnie Brandt (Paul H. Brookes Publishing). Detailed resources, forms, and curricula are provided to parents, professionals, and school staff to cooperatively teach essential lifelong leisure skills. To order, call 800/638-3775.

- *Community Recreation and People with Disabilities: Strategies for Inclusion* by Stuart J. Schleien, M. Tipton Ray, and Frederick Green (Paul H. Brookes Publishing). This second edition of a classic resource provides a comprehensive, step-by-step guide to community recreation inclusion. To order, call 800/638-3775.

- *Powerful Partnerships: Parents and Professionals Building Inclusive Recreation Programs Together* by Stuart J. Schleien, John Rynders, Linda Heyne, and Carla Tabourne (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota). This collection of articles focuses on enhancing family involvement and community development through inclusive recreation. To order, call 612/625-7583.

program. Contact may also take the form of written communications such as letters, e-mail, periodic questionnaires, brochures, or newsletters.

Seek Parent Input in Program Evaluation

Parent feedback is essential to successful inclusion. A one- or two-page satisfaction questionnaire, mailed with a self-addressed stamped envelope, is easy for parents to complete and can give professionals valuable insight into the inclusion process. Parents can be asked about the ways in which the child benefited from the experience, what the child enjoyed and did not enjoy about the program, problems that arose, and program recommendations. Questions should be both closed-ended, which take little time to answer, as well as open-ended, which provide more in-depth opinion. Family-professional focus groups can also be convened to further evaluate the success or shortcomings of inclusion.

We have become knowledgeable about the many benefits that individuals with and without disabilities receive from inclusive recreation services. We have also come to understand that one of the best ways we can become better helpers is through ongoing collaboration and dialogue with the families of children with disabilities we serve. Parents and professionals must continue to explore and practice effective methods of collaboration to make welcoming and accommodating services available to us all. ■

Note. References for this article are available from the first author.

** The development of this article was partially supported by the Research and Training Center on Residential Services and Community Living through Cooperative Agreement No. H133B30072 funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitative Research, U.S. Department of Education. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the U.S. Department of Education and no official endorsement should be inferred.*

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